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Dancing Right(s): Dance, Disability and Legal Empowerment in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka's long civil war (1983-2009) resulted in large-scale personal, physical and social trauma. It led to a large number of deaths and many people became disabled due to the war. Disabled people in Sri Lanka are often marginalized and excluded from the public sphere. Whilst there are initiatives to support disabled people from both the State and Non-Governmental Organisations, support often adopts a charity-based approach which has been criticised for contributing to marginalisation and the dependency of disabled people on other people and organisations. Performing Empowerment (2016-18) was a research project that responded to this context by seeking to examine whether combining dance workshops with human rights education might lead to greater legal empowerment for disabled people in Sri Lanka. In this paper, I reflect on the experiences of five Tamil women who took part in the project, outlining how they gained confidence and rights awareness which enabled them to self-advocate and make changes to their everyday lives, demonstrating increased legal empowerment. I argue that this change arose in part through different forms of performance that they experienced within the workshops, which enabled a series of transportations from their daily lives.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, disability, dance, performance, gender, legal empowerment

Introduction

The civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) left many people traumatised, injured and lacking appropriate support. Furthermore, people who became disabled as a result of the war often face marginalisation, poverty and social stigma. In the past, disabled people[i] in Sri Lanka have been largely excluded from mainstream society and missing from public spheres.[ii] Chandani Liyanage suggests sociocultural conceptualisations of disability in Sri Lanka are shaped by the attitudes of families and members of local communities, access barriers to mainstream education, a lack of specialist resources and religious beliefs about karma.[iii] She points out that some social attitudes have started to change and that more disabled people have begun to assert their rights but that movement towards integration is hindered by both the social and physical environments.[iv]

In response to this context, Performing Empowerment: Dance, disability and inclusive development in post-war Sri Lanka (2016-18),[v] aimed to examine how combining dance and human rights education might lead to greater legal empowerment for people with conflict-related physical disabilities in Sri Lanka. In this article, I focus on the experiences of five Tamil women who took part in a series of dance and rights workshops hosted by Sri-Lankan/German arts association, VisAbility during the project and discuss how different forms of performance within the workshops revealed some of the layered factors affecting disabled women in Sri Lanka and shifted their feelings towards themselves. First, I describe how being asked to perform in public, civil spaces foregrounded the gendered and politicised nature of the female participants' lived experiences. I go on to analyse how it is that the repetition of performative acts throughout the project led the participants to gain confidence and self-esteem, which led to greater legal empowerment. Following Neloufer de Mel,[vi] I build on Richard Schechner's discussion of transportation and transformation in performance[vii] to argue that the performative exercises undertaken in the workshops led to changes in the participants which lasted beyond a single moment of transportation. However, I question the term transformation as an

alternative to transportation in this context, suggesting instead that the participants experienced subtle, but lasting, shifts.

The culture of Sri Lanka has been shaped in part by its history of colonization. Areas of Sri Lanka were colonized by the Portuguese (1505 – 1658) and the Dutch (1658 – 1796), and in 1815, Kandy in the centre of the country was ceded to the British, thus beginning a period of colonial rule that lasted until 1948.[viii] Policies advanced during British rule contributed to divisions between ethnic groups, in particular between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities.[ix] These divisions deepened after independence and in particular after the election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike as Prime Minister in 1956.[x] Sinhalese government policies discriminated against Tamils, which lead to protests by Tamils and anti-Tamil riots between the 1950s-80s.[xi] The separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed by Velupillai Prabhakaran in 1976. In 1983 the LTTE killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers in Jaffna. This led to the start of the civil war which lasted until May 2009, when the Government defeated the LTTE.[xii] The war resulted in a large number of deaths[xiii] and de Mel explains that it is estimated that in the north of the country 10% of the population became disabled due to war.[xiv]

The concept of empowerment is complex and has been critiqued for its Westernised ideologies.[xv] Furthermore, scholars examining dance and performance have pointed out that the association between dance and empowerment requires critical attention,[xvi] not least because, "dance has been used repeatedly, at different periods in history and in many parts of the world, to promote strict adherence to oppressive ideologies".[xvii] Furthermore, claims that dance can empower marginalised groups are often emotive and general[xviii] and serve practitioners and policy-makers by attributing social value to dance, rather than necessarily serving those people taking part in dance activities.[xix]

In this project we examined 'legal empowerment', which is a process that focuses on helping people develop the capabilities needed to enact their legal rights. The Asian Development Bank suggests that legal empowerment goes beyond legal aid and acknowledges that legal education should include the opportunities for vulnerable groups to apply skills and knowledge. Legal empowerment aims to provide people with the understanding and capabilities to act in their interest and ensure that the law is enforced.[xx] Legal empowerment, therefore, is concerned with helping people to develop the skills needed to assert themselves successfully within existing legal frameworks.[xxi]

VisAbility's workshops aimed to support disabled people to develop the confidence and knowledge to successfully assert themselves in legal and civic contexts, thus increasing their legal empowerment. This is a timely aim in the context of Sri Lanka. The country signed the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and ratified it in February 2016. According to the United Nations, the Convention offers:

> movement from viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.[xxii]

The emphasis is therefore placed on the agency of individuals to enact their rights. However, many disabled people in Sri Lanka are not able to do this as they don't have the necessary confidence, rights knowledge and/or resources. Furthermore, it is argued that the State is not

doing enough to remedy this situation. For example, Dinesha Samararatne suggests: "Even at a policy level the link made between the responsibility of the State towards disabled people and towards the protection of their rights remains weak. Most measures taken for the improvement of the conditions of disabled people remains both basic in quality and simplistic in its rationale".[xxiii] Furthermore, Liyanage outlines how support for disabled people in Sri Lanka generally adopts a charity-based approach, focusing on the provision of basic livelihood needs and argues that this framework contributes to the marginalisation of disabled people and dependence on others:

> The fixed identity of the disabled body has become a source of merit for majority of the able-bodied in the society, encouraging them to care for the disabled by simply providing survival needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and so forth while undermining or neglecting most of the civil rights of persons with disabilities as human beings. Thus, the above construction reinforces the identity of the disabled as dependents. [xxiv]

Liyanage therefore argues directly for the relevance of a rights-based approach, focused on the protection and assertion of human rights for disabled people.

Performing Empowerment aimed to evaluate critically VisAbility's proposition that combining dance and human rights education would lead to greater legal empowerment for disabled people. VisAbility was founded by Sri Lankan dancer and teacher, Mahesh Umagiliya, disabled German choreographer Gerda König, and German human rights practitioner and scholar Helena-Ulrike Marambio in 2014. They were motivated by three key factors: 1.) Umagiliya's recognition that disabled people in Sri Lanka are frequently marginalized and often lack knowledge about their rights,[xxv] 2.) Marambio's thesis that teaching human rights education is more effective when approached holistically, meaning that people often need to develop self-esteem and confidence before they are able to enact their rights[xxvi] and 3.) König's extensive experience as a teacher and choreographer working with 'mixed-abled'[xxvii] dance.

The research team, Lars Waldorf (Principle Investigator) and I (Co-Investigator)[xxviii] aimed to establish whether the workshops would lead to any changes in the participants' ability to enact their rights, and if so, how the combination of dance and rights education facilitated this change. Measuring legal empowerment is a complex undertaking[xxix] due to the lack of a concrete definition and how what it means to gain empowerment in relation to laws and legal services is dependent on each person's unique circumstances. We worked with a core group of eight participants. We conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews at the start of each week-long programme of workshops to gather quantitative data regarding each participant's knowledge of rights, legal services and self-esteem and qualitative data about their histories, experiences, home-lives and feelings about themselves. These surveys and interviews were repeated at the end of the week. Alongside the survey and interview data, we gauged changes to confidence levels by observing how the participants were moving, responding to tasks, working with others and contributing to group discussions. These methods helped us to understand the impact of the programme of workshops on the participants' rights knowledge, confidence and self-esteem. The first workshops took place in June-August 2017. We repeated these methods during the second programme of workshops in December 2017-January 2018 and conducted follow-up interviews with the core participants in August 2018, allowing us to evaluate the impact of the work over the course of 13-14 months. All of the participants were

Tamil and did not speak any English. We used local interpreters for the interviews and to translate the questionnaires and responses. [xxx]

Dance, Disability and Gender in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, it is often Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and charities who provide information and support for disabled people. While there are many organisations doing admirable work in this area, the dominance of the charity-based approach means that much of the current support does not focus on helping people to develop their rights and self-advocacy within society.[xxxi] There has been limited research done to examine the potential of the arts, in particular the performing arts to support equality goals in relation to disability in Sri Lanka. There is one large performing arts organization, the Sunera Foundation, who work with disabled people across Sri Lanka. The organization has a team of trainers, who facilitate weekly workshops and one-off sessions, which involve drama, dance, and music, culminating in group performances.[xxxii] There are a small number of grassroots organisations working in the area of theatre and performance, however, the Sunera Foundation is the only large-scale organization working with disabled people through the performing arts. de Mel suggests: "In Sri Lanka, the aspiration to disabled dance and performance remains at an incipient stage and reflects both attitudinal neglect of the arts as a resource in the development of life skills and the unavailability of sufficient dance/art/theatre/music programmes for training people with disabilities".[xxxiii] Whilst the priorities of the Sunera Foundation and VisAbility overlap to some extent, the latter focuses on combining dance with human rights education, giving their work a unique approach within Sri Lanka.

There are two forms of classical dance most commonly practiced in Sri Lanka, Kandyan dance, which is traditionally a Sinhalese form and bharata natyam, which is conventionally associated with Tamil culture. Sri Lankan classical dance has been studied by many scholars[xxxiv] and the dancing body has been highlighted as a site of tension and contradictions. Analysis often reveals the intersections of sexuality and respectability that can be read in the dancing body, and the way that social and cultural contexts inform how the body is understood in performance. While there are notable differences between Sinhalese and Tamil cultures, discourses demonstrate how many of the issues that arise through dancing are shared by Sinhalese and Tamil women.

Kandyan dance was traditionally performed by boys and men but the form is now also learned and performed by girls and women. Reed suggests that the introduction of the form into schools in the 1940s and 50s has resulted in an increased presence for women within the form.[xxxv] She points out that this marked a significant shift in the role of women in the dance:

> Prior to the 1940s, Sinhala women, with the exception of the performers of digge natum […], did not dance. Dancing as a profession was considered immoral, "a trade fit for harlots" (Makulloluwa 1976, 5). The promotion of Kandyan dance by the state, and the performance of dance by respectable women, has changed this view, but girls and women must always be vigilant about how, where, and with whom they dance in order to maintain their reputations as "good girls". [xxxvi]

Attitudes towards women dancing can therefore be seen to have evolved significantly, however, women are still expected to guard against any potential damage to their respectability.

Bharata natyam was imported to Sri Lanka from southern India in the 19th and 20th centuries.[xxxvii] Janet O'Shea describes how "Jaffna residents hired South Indian devadasis, courtesan performers who traditionally danced in salons, festivals, and courts to dance in temple festivals".[xxxviii] Unlike Kandyan dance, bharata natyam is a traditionally female form, however, O'Shea proposes that "'gendered conservatism' restricted elite women's performance of bharata natyam".[xxxix] Furthermore, Ahalya Satkunaratnam suggests,

> In the Sri Lankan Tamil community, negative associations with the devadasis and dancing girls were present in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which initially barred many Tamil girls from engaging in dance practice (Thiruchandran 1998, 39). This contentiousness surrounding the dance was influenced, in part, by the social reformer Arumuga Navalar (1833–1870) who promoted Tamil language, literature, and practices as a means of resisting Westernization and European colonial influence. Navalar's reform also encouraged Sri Lankan Tamil daughters to be raised to demonstrate the four qualities of an acceptable Tamil woman: fear (of doing the wrong thing), innocence, shyness, and chastity.[xl]

Bharata natyam is now frequently studied by both Tamil and Sinhalese girls and women[xli] and has come to be associated with the construction and presentation of idealized forms of femininity. For example, Satkunaratnam describes a young dancer's *arangetram* (debut dance concert) as an opportunity for families to present their daughters to their communities and demonstrate their respectability and affluence.[xlii] In relation to Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities in London, Ann David talks of bharata natyam classes as a "vehicle for the enculturation of young female Tamils as it is thought to epitomise femininity, to encourage the learning of mythology and religious stories, and to be a valuable carrier of tradition".[xliii] However, O'Shea points out that while many Tamil families now permit their daughters to study dance, performance careers are generally discouraged,[xliv] echoing Reed's suggestion that, "women's dancing is fraught with ambivalence and contradiction" because "[t]he public displays of women's bodies on stage clashes with ideals of respectable Sinhala Buddhist womanhood that emphasize the virtues of modesty, domesticity, and restraint".[xlv]

Although my focus is on the experience of women during Performing Empowerment the workshops were attended by both men and women. While VisAbility's approach does not use classical forms, the tensions present in the movement and performance of women's bodies played out in multiple ways throughout the research, meaning that the experiences of the female participants are of particular interest in relation to existing discourses on dance in Sri Lanka. The intersections of disability, gender and the participants' histories as civilians or former cadres,[xlvi] meant that there were multiple factors affecting these women's experience of dancing and performing.

Border Zones

The first round of workshops, which took place in June-August 2017 led to increased confidence for many of the participants, but the expectations of the participants to touch each other and perform in public places caused unease for some of the female participants, revealing the intersections between the cultural expectations of women, disabled people and female former cadres. VisAbility ran a week-long series of workshops in Batticaloa in the east of Sri Lanka and Jaffna in the north. The workshops were open to all disabled people, regardless of the nature of their disability and to non-disabled people. However, our research focused

specifically on adults with physical, war-related disabilities.[xlvii] The initial workshops were followed by a seven-day training programme with some of participants from the first workshop who had demonstrated leadership and an interest in developing their own workshops. Between December 2017 and January 2018, VisAbility returned to Batticaloa and Jaffna to run a second series of workshops in each city, during which many of the original participants returned and were joined by some new people. All of the workshops ended with dance performances in public places, including marketplaces, outside local government offices and on the beach.

Six of the seven days were spent developing dance skills. Participants learned movement exercises, undertook creative tasks and helped to develop the performances. Dance exercises were based on the following core concepts: leading and following, where participants copy one another; contact work, during which people move while in physical contact; improvisation, where participants move spontaneously in response to given stimuli; composition which involves experimenting with how bodies and movement are arranged in space; working with props; and working in partners and groups. Reflection on the tasks was an important part of the workshops and after each exercise, the participants discussed their experiences with VisAbility. The approach to the workshops arose from Umagiliya's and König's practices. König established her 'mixed-abled' company, DIN A 13 in 1995 and has developed a large body of work, arising primarily from the principles of western contemporary theatre dance. Umagiliya, on the other hand was a traditional Kandyan dancer and performed for many years with the prestigious Chitrasena dance company. On leaving the company, he was asked to teach movement to drama students at a university in Colombo and so started to develop non-codified movement techniques in order to teach movement principles to non-dancers. Umagiliya later went on to perform with König's Germany-based company giving him insight into European dance practices but describes his approach to movement as primarily arising from his own history and training, explorations of movement principles and experience working in Asia. [xlviii]

The participants also took part in a one-day rights education workshop during the programme. These workshops addressed human and disability rights and the types of benefits and services that disabled people in Sri Lanka are entitled to. Information was given about the procedures for applying for benefits and strategies for challenging discrimination, potentially unfair decisions or a lack of information.

The five women whose experiences I focus on here were aged between 31 and 57 when the workshops began. Three of the women, Jamini[xlix], Sharmila and Aarini are former cadres all of whom were injured during the war. Jamini is unmarried and has paid employment. Sharmila and Aarini are each married and have children. Lakshana is a widow who was a civilian during the war and was injured by a landmine. She lives with her two daughters and two grandchildren. Manishi is also married and lives with her husband and mother. She was a child during the war and was injured when shot by a sniper.

Although some of the women have some paid employment, their daily lives are based largely around domestic duties. For example, Manishi described her role as looking after the house and garden. She would like to study but feels she can't because of her duties at home. Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis write:

> Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers and disseminators of 'tradition', 'culture', 'community' and 'nation'. Such perceptions have not only legitimized the surveillance and disciplining of women's bodies and minds

> in the name of communal/national 'morality' and 'honour' but they have also re-inscribed the expectation that whatever women may do, they are primarily mothers and wives, they have to marry and have children and the domestic burdens are solely theirs.[l]

In our interviews, female participants frequently referred to the stresses of keeping a home and looking after a family. For many of the participants, the value of the workshops was partly that they provided a way to leave the problems they faced at home. On day five, Aarini, for example described how at first, she was tense at the thought of attending but was now feeling happy and attributed this happiness in part to the opportunity to leave behind the economic and family problems she faced at home. Lakshana also described the workshops as offering an escape from the problems at home due to poverty and a strained relationship with her daughter.

At the start of the workshops, many of the participants seemed shy. Jamini, for example would sit out of exercises and appeared to be resistant to some of the things being asked of her. Jamini and Aarini also appeared unsure at times and hid behind other participants or hung back when asked to perform an exercise in small groups. Manishi was also shy and spoke openly about this during our interviews. She described hiding at the back during photographs and said that she had difficulty making friends. Manishi said that one of the reasons that she attended the workshops is that she wished to overcome her shyness.

At the end of the first week of workshops all five of these women appeared to have grown in confidence. This was evident in their increased willingness to take part in new exercises, lead small groups and speak during group discussions. The way they moved also changed over the course of the first week of workshops. Manishi for instance, had been very hesitant to give her weight to her partner at first but started leaning further to give her weight more fully, indicating increased trust. She appeared more comfortable being off balance and taking physical risks. While at the end of week one, Manishi was still positioning herself toward the back of the group, she appeared less nervous when encouraged to step forward or lead exercises.

Aarini, Sharmila and Jamini all took leading roles when working in break-out groups. All three of these women had appeared physically strong from the start of the workshops, but there was a transition during the week in terms of their behavior in the group, which changed from appearing reluctant and nervous to demonstrating leadership. However, they also expressed discomfort and unease with some aspects of the work. For example, touch is one of the core tools used by VisAbility and exercises involved participants touching the hands, arms, or other body parts of the other people in the room. For these three female participants, the request for them to dance with men in such close proximity caused discomfort due to expectations about appropriate behaviour for women. Another female participant who did not return for the second workshops described how dancing with men could cause problems with her husband. This was reflected by another female participant describing her unease at the expectation that she would partner with a man during a contact exercise. These responses can be understood as an example of the expectations of Tamil women to conform to the feminine ideals of chastity[li] and respectability. The anxieties expressed by the participants were perhaps heightened due to the fact that the participants were being asked not only to touch but to dance together. In dance, the central expressivity of the body can have particular connotations. As Reed points out "because dance has the potential to be seen as immoral, women must be vigilant about where, how, and with whom they dance". [lii]

The public nature of the performances was also problematic for Aarini, Sharmila and Jamini. VisAbility selected the performance locations to try and attract as many audience members as possible. Sites included parks, town beaches, market squares, and outside government offices. The suggestion that the participants would perform at the side of a busy road which divides the local council offices from the public park in Jaffna, and at a busy market square in Batticaloa, were met with resistance from some female participants in both contexts. During the first round of workshops in Jaffna, after some negotiation, it was decided that the participants would paint their faces to disguise their identities.[liii]

In choosing public places, VisAbility aimed to make a socio-political statement about the capabilities and visibility of disabled people. Making disabled people visible through very public performances, was intended to challenge the association between disabled people and the private sphere of the home[liv] and disrupt social expectations of disabled people. This approach is akin to other forms of 'resisting choreographies' which use the organisation of bodies in space to make a political statement.[lv] However, this activism was driven by VisAbility, rather than then participants and the public performance sites posed a challenge for some female participants. Reed suggests that: "Respectable dance takes place in respectable places, and performing in spaces that are deemed to be disreputable tarnishes the reputation of a dancer, who may be labelled shameless or immoral for her performances".[lvi] Reed identifies disreputable, public sites as 'border zone sites'[lvii] and suggests that: "Women who dance in border zones run the risk of being seen as sexually compromised or even as prostitutes. Where, when, and how, and with whom a woman dances is critical in determining whether she is viewed as respectable or not".[lviii] The road is one of the border zones identified by Reed. She explains how Kandyan dance is often performed at 'peraharas', which might be small processions or grand events and take place on a variety of occasions when Sinhala tradition is celebrated. Reed describes how some female teachers avoid dancing in peraharas because they require dancing "on the road"– a contentious site due in part to its public nature.[lix]

Judith Butler[lx] writes that gender is constituted through a "stylized repetition of acts"[lxi] and draws a parallel between "the acts by which gender is constituted" and "performative acts within theatrical contexts".[lxii] However, she points out that theatrical contexts can invoke different responses than everyday settings. These different responses are due to the way that in the theatre, "one can say 'this is just an act' and de-realize the acting' whereas 'on the street or in the bus' there are no theatrical conventions and therefore not presumption that the act is distinct from reality".[lxiii] The performances on the road at the end of VisAbility's workshops were not entirely free from theatrical convention, but their position within everyday, civic contexts contributed to discomfort for some female participants. This can be seen to be in part due to the ways that within these contexts there is not the same mechanisms for distinguishing reality from pretence that occur in conventional theatre settings. The performances can be seen to transgress the gendered and cultural expectations of the participants by disrupting the associations between women and the domestic realm and between women and respectability. These civic performances perhaps seemed more risky to the participants than they might have done within a theatre setting as these alternative ways of performing themselves could not be as easily dismissed as 'just an act'.

The resistance to the context of performance was not shared by all the female participants, however, and three of the women who expressed discomfort with performing in public are former cadres, meaning that their concerns were multi-faceted. Aarini, Sharmila and Jamini were worried about the public nature of the performances in part due to concerns about being recognized by other members of their local community. This was in part due to their histories

as former cadres.[lxiv] One of the former cadres who took part the project described how as cadres they had felt confident but that once they returned to society, they were dependent on their parents or husbands and must obey their wishes. She explained that performances were challenging for these women because they worried what people would think about them being separated from their husbands and that some people in the crowd suggested that they were only performing due to the confidence they developed when they were members of LTTE, implying that confidence was something that could be criticised by members of the community.

There has been much discussion of the role of women in the LTTE. In particular, debates focus on the questions of liberation, agency and empowerment: "Much of this feminist debate is framed in binary terms of whether the women in the LTTE are liberated or subjugated (de Silva, 1994; Coomaraswamy, 1996), agents or victims (de Mel, 1998)."[lxv] de Mel suggests that, "ex-combatants are often stigmatized in their own communities for being members of the LTTE".[lxvi] Combined with the expectations of women to behave in a respectable way, and the attitudes towards disability in Sri Lanka, many of the women who took part in the project were dancing at the intersection of multiple forms of expectation, marginalization and stigma; therefore, the performances posed significant challenges for these women. The reluctance from Aarini, Jamini and Sharmila to perform in public reveals the intersectional nature of their experiences. The political impetus from VisAbility was to challenge stigma around disability, yet there was a tension between the framework of the 'resisting choreography' and the implications of performing in the 'border zone' of the public road.

Lasting Change: Transportation and Transformation

One of the outcomes of the first workshops was that the confidence gained by the participants translated into legal empowerment and was retained, to some extent, beyond the end of the workshops. In December 2017 – six months after the first workshops – we conducted follow-up interviews with all of the participants and observed VisAbility's second programme of workshops. We conducted interviews before the second workshops to find out what, if anything, had changed for the participants since the original workshops and then interviewed them again at the end of the week.

Manishi described how when she arrived at the first workshop she had been scared, but over the course of the week she realised she could do the tasks. She said that this confidence that she felt had continued over the six months since the workshops. She explained how she had learned a lot about disability rights and also to persevere with asking for benefits. She had re-applied for the housing scheme that she had previously been denied and was now on the waiting list. She described feeling more able to speak without fear and ask questions if she doesn't understand and had recently participated in a sports day.

Lakshana described how she had felt happy and healthy after the workshops and had learned how to get things done in relation to claiming benefits. She had lobbied the local government officers until she had received a benefit that she was entitled to. Lakshana had previously been rejected from a scheme set up to support disabled people living below the poverty line and felt that people who were better off had been selected. After the first workshops, she went to the local government offices and explained that she understood how the scheme worked and wanted to know why she hadn't been granted the benefit. She was told that her name was on the list, so she pushed them to find out what had happened. This resulted in her receiving the support, and she attributed this situation to the confidence she gained through the workshops. Lakshana also described changes in her daily life, saying that she felt more independent and

was relying on her daughters less to do things outside the house, and pushing herself to do more as well as interacting with her neighbours more.

Jamini had gained access to a disability benefit that she had previously stopped receiving. After the workshops she wrote to the local government office and as a result started receiving the benefit again. She described how she had also spoken up for herself and asserted her rights when faced with an issue on the bus and had spoken to other people about what she had learned in the workshops.

Aarini had also used the information she learned in the workshops to gain legal aid for a family problem and felt very positively about the experience, reiterating that it made her feel braver.

Sharmila was the only participant from our sample who had not claimed benefits or services in the period between the two workshops. She said that this was because she now understood the systems and knew that she was receiving all of the support she was eligible for, indicating that it was not a lack of legal empowerment that prevented her from claiming. She described how she wanted to help other disabled people in her community to understand and assert their rights.

As well as these women, three more of the eight core participants gained access to benefits and services that they had previously been denied or were unaware of. This was achieved through self-advocacy, demonstrating an increase in legal empowerment. The participants not only gained knowledge of their rights and the benefits and services they are entitled to, but also the self-confidence to assert themselves and articulate their rights. Their increased legal empowerment demonstrates the effectiveness of VisAbility's methods. Furthermore, there were several people who took part in the workshops who were not part of our core sample who also gained access to benefits and services as a direct result of their participation. Each of the participants have taken steps to increase their economic and social wellbeing, but what is it about the combination of dance and human rights education that facilitated these changes?

One of the strongest themes from the interviews was the way that the workshops provided an escape from the stresses and difficulties of the participants' daily lives, a finding that is reflected by Sunethra Bandranaike's[lxvii] suggestion that the participants working with Sunera Foundation, "adore it because it is the very opposite of what goes on in their lives".[lxviii] It was not always clear from our interviews how much the escape that the participants articulated was to do with the dancing and how much it was simply the opportunity to come to a workshop and break with their everyday routines. However, many people reflected positively on their experiences of dancing and explained how when they were doing the exercises, they were able to forget both their daily lives and pain within their bodies. These reflections align with de Mel's suggestion that experience of performing can invoke 'transportation' and 'transformation' for the performers.[lxix] Schechner argues that when performers are transported they are "taken somewhere" experientially, but at the end of the performance they reenter ordinary life "just about where they went in".[lxx] On the other hand, when performers are transformed the performers are changed by the experience.[lxxi]

Echoing the reservations towards the notion of empowerment I articulated previously, de Mel points to the increased wariness of practitioners working in the field of applied theatre towards the rhetoric of transformation and suggests that performers are generally transported, rather than transformed. Furthermore, she points out that Bandranaike does not use the words 'empowerment' or 'change agent', rather that her "emphasis was on the importance of the

transitory moment – of exuberance, visibility, applause and affirmation on stage – rather than a claim about disabled participants being agents of change".[lxxii]

I agree that we should approach with caution the idea that performance is transformative, in particular when discussing short-term interventions. However, our findings do point to changes in the participants' daily lives and feelings towards themselves. Our most recent interviews, conducted in August 2018, 13-14 months after the first workshops indicated that aspects of the participants' lives had been changed through involvement in the project. We found that most of the participants still felt more confident than they did before the workshops, and some had been running dance and/or rights information sessions in their own communities. I would question, therefore, that the participants left the experience 'exactly as they went in' and suggest that a more lasting change occurred. What is less clear is what it is precisely about the experience that led to this change in the participants' feelings towards themselves and subsequent capabilities to enact and defend their rights. I agree with de Mel that performance plays a key role in the transportation of participants and as Schechner suggests, repeated transportations through performance might lead to transformation.[lxxiii]

During each of VisAbility's workshops the participants performed publicly only once or twice so they cannot be said to have experienced repeated transportations through performance[lxxiv] if we understand performance to refer solely to public-facing events. However, forms of performance also featured in many of the tasks, in particular those which emphasised processes of looking and copying. For example, participants often worked with mirroring, during which one person moves and the other reflects their actions and follow-the-leader, when the group copy the actions of a single person. During each of these tasks the person leading the movement enacts a sequence of movements while being watched by others, thus undertaking a form of performance. Performing within the workshop was something the participants reflected positively on, with one participant explaining: "I was proud when I am performing and others followed me. Every step I made they followed exactly how I did. It made me happy".[lxxv] The participants also undertook tasks in small groups, which were then performed to the other participants. While the participants were not playing a character in sense described by Schechner,[lxxvi] each performance within the workshops and perhaps even their attendance at the workshops at all can be understood as enabling the participants to perform different versions of themselves and therefore to be transported from their daily lives.

It might be possible to imagine that each transportation that occurred within the workshops and during the public performance led to a more lasting change that, combined with the rights knowledge participants gained, allowed them to self-advocate and therefore make changes to their daily lives. However, I suggest that the term 'transformation' implies a more complete, transcendental alteration than the one that most participants experienced. Although the changes that participants made to their lives are significant in terms of improving their livelihoods and wellbeing, as well as feeling more confident, their daily lives are not all that different to the way they were before their participation in the workshops. Furthermore, we should be wary of implying that transformation is an aspiration or has inherent value, as for many of the participants it was incremental change to particular feelings and circumstances that inspired their involvement in the project and left them feeling that it has benefitted them. I suggest that the participants harnessed the confidence experienced through these moments of transportation and the rights-based knowledge acquired through the workshops to engage more effectively with state structures and systems, but that we might think about this change in terms of small shifts in their everyday lives and feelings towards themselves as opposed to adopting the term transformation.

It seems that this shift arose through the combination of dance and human rights education. In particular, the way that forms of performance, such as copying and mirroring were used as movement devices, alongside small group and public performances resulted in a series of transportations for the participants. They were then able to use the new feelings of confidence in combination with their new rights knowledge to self-advocate, leading to more lasting changes in their daily lives. The way that the feelings of self-confidence lasted beyond the end of the workshops is perhaps due in part to the way that the participants effectively self-advocated, allowing them to exercise autonomy over their circumstances, indicating that the combination of dance and rights education has something significant to offer the area of legal empowerment.

Conclusion

The interviews with and observations of the five women I discuss in this article demonstrate how gender, disability and their status as civilians or former cadres during the war intersect in their experiences of VisAbility's workshops and the way they experienced dancing and performing. It is possible to suggest that the experience of performing within the workshops through exercises that involved watching and copying allowed the participants to undergo a series of transportations, which led to a more lasting change in the way they felt about themselves and their capacities to self-advocate. However, performing in public, civic contexts posed dilemmas for some of the participants.

The experiences of these women demonstrate the potential of rights-based approaches to supporting disabled people in Sri Lanka. All five women gained some confidence, knowledge and/or legal empowerment, allowing them to make changes in their daily lives and self-advocate effectively. While we do not know how long-term this impact is, our interviews in August 2018 indicated that the changes experienced by these participants lasted at least 12 months beyond the end of their initial involvement in the project. While this is a positive outcome questions remain for VisAbility how to continue their work. They are dependent on short-term funding, meaning that the sustainability of their practice is never certain. VisAbility continue to support the participants in various ways and have recently been granted two rounds of funding from the British Council in Sri Lanka to help participants develop their own workshops within their communities; however, whether the participants will be able to continue the work long-term depends on securing ongoing funding.

Performing Empowerment demonstrated how workshops that combined dance and human rights education resulted in changes in the participants' self-esteem, self-advocacy and legal empowerment. The small scale of this study and limited sample size means that these findings are preliminary and many questions that remain, including how we might evidence and articulate more fully the role dance played in the changes experienced by these women. However, it is clear from this project that there is significant potential in the combination of dance and human rights to support people to develop legal empowerment.

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Notes

[i] The construction 'person with a disability/people with disabilities' is most commonly used in Sri Lanka. There is some debate about this terminology. 'Person with a disability' is preferred by some because of the way it puts the emphasis on the person, rather than the disability, however, 'disabled person' is generally favoured by those who follow the social model of disability as it highlights how people are disabled by social barriers (see Sarah Ismail 'Disability And Description: Disabled People Or People With Disabilities?' *huffpost* (2016)). In this article I use 'disabled people' in accordance with the social model but recognise that the formulation of 'people with disabilities' is most commonly used in Sri Lanka.

[ii] N. Baskaran 'People with Disabilities and Their Representation in Public Spaces: A Case Study of Post-War Jaffna' *International Journal of Innovation and Economic Development,* Vol. 3, no. 1 (2017): 86-98.

[iii] Chandani Liyanage 'Sociocultural Construction of Disability in Sri Lanka: Charity to Rights-based Approach' in Santoshi Halder and Lori Czop Assaf (eds.) *Inclusion, Disability and Culture: An Ethnographic Perspective Traversing Abilities and Challenges.* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 251-266

[iv]Ibid, 253.

[v] Funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council/Economic Social Research Council through the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (PaCCS).

[vi] Neloufer de Mel (2016) 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender', in Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic (eds.) *Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook* (Cham: Springer, 2016): 99-166

[vii] Richard Schechner 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', *The Kenyon Review,* Vol. 3, no. 4 (1981): 91.

[viii] Susan Reed *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual and Politics in Sri Lanka,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 9.

[ix] *Dance and the Nation,* 10.

[x] Ibid. See also Channa Wickremesekera *The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka,* (Oxon: Routledge), 10.

[xi] *Dance and the Nation,* 10.

[xii] See Ibid.

[xiii] Reed suggests that it is estimated that the war resulted in nearly 100,000 deaths (*Dance and the Nation,* 10) but the number of deaths is highly debated.

[xiv] 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender', 103.

[xv] Manoranjan Mohanty 'On the Concept of "Empowerment"', *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.30, no. 1 (1995): 1434-1436.

[xvi] Such as Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), Neloufer de Mel (2016) 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender', in Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic (eds.) *Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook* (Cham: Springer, 2016): 99-166 and Sara Houston 'Participation in Community Dance: A Road to Empowerment and Transformation?' *New Theatre Quarterly,* Vol. 21, no. 2 (2005): 166-177.

[xvii] *Dance, Human Rights and Social Justice,* XV.

[xviii] Emslie and Ackroyd in 'Participation in Community Dance', 167

[xix] See 'Participation in Community Dance' and 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender'.

[xx] Asian Development Bank 'Legal Empowerment for Women and Disadvantaged Groups' (2009): 9.

[xxi] See also Lars Waldorf 'Legal Empowerment and Horizontal Inequalities After Conflict', *Journal of Development Studies,* 53:3 (2019): 437-455 and Lars Waldorf 'Between Transition and Transformation: Legal Empowerment as Collective Reparations' in Paul Gready and Simon Robins (eds.) *From Transitional to Transformative Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), 131-149.

[xxii] United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (n.d.): https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html

[xxiii] Dinesha Samararatne 'Critical Reflections on Recognising and Enforcing Disability Rights within the Sri Lankan Legal Framework' (2012): http://archive.cmb.ac.lk:8080/research/bitstream/70130/3375/1/AnnualResearchSymposium2012UniversityofColombo.176-178.pdf

[xxiv] 'Sociocultural Construction of Disability in Sri Lanka', 235.

[xxv] Interview with Umagiliya, 2017

[xxvi] Interview with Marambio, 2017

[xxvii] This is the term used by VisAbility to describe their practice. Terms used to describe practices in which disabled and non-disabled people dance together, including 'mixed-abled', 'integrated' and 'inclusive' are the subject of much debate. However, I have chosen here to adopt the term used by VisAbility.

[xxviii] Adam Benjamin also contributed to the early stages of the project.

[xxix] See 'Legal Empowerment for Women and Disadvantaged Groups' and Robert Porter 'Measurement of Legal Empowerment through the Subjective Perceptions of Individuals', *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal,* Vol. 32, no. 3 (2014): 213-221.
[xxx] Some of the context for the project outlined in this introduction is also discussed in Hetty Blades, 'Dance, Disability and Performance in North and East Sri Lanka: Evaluating Audience Responses' in Carla Vendramin, Hetty Blades, Kate Marsh and Sarah Whatley (eds.) *Exchanging, Moving, Translating: Thoughts on Dance and Disability.* (2019): 330-346.
[xxxi] See 'Sociocultural Construction of Disability in Sri Lanka'.
[xxxii] This information is taken from the Sunera Foundation website. See: http://www.sunerafoundation.org
[xxxiii] 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender, 110.
[xxxiv] See *Dance and the Nation,* Janet O'Shea *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), Janet O'Shea 'From Temple to Battlefield: Bharata Natyam in the Sri Lankan Civil War' in Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf (eds.) *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111-132 and Ahalya Satkunaratnam 'Staging War: Performing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka', *Dance Research Journal,* Vol 45, no. 1 (2013): 81-108.
[xxxv] *Dance and the Nation,* 198.
[xxxvi] Ibid, 198.
[xxxvii] 'From Temple to Battlefield', 122.
[xxxviii] Ibid.
[xxxix] Ibid, 123.
[xl] 'Staging War', 83.
[xli] 'Staging War' and 'From Temple to Battlefield'.
[xlii] 'Ibid, 93-94.
[xliii] Ann David, 'Embodied Migration: Performance Practices of Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Communities in London', *Journal of Intercultural Studies,* Vol. 33, no. 4 (2012): 381.
[xliv] 'From Temple to Battlefield'.
[xlv] *Dance and the Nation,* 15.
[xlvi] The term combatant is also frequently used to refer to people who fought for the LTTE. Here, I follow Friedman in using the term cadre as it is commonly used in Sri Lanka and the LTTE included both combatants and non-combatants, 632. Rebekka Friedman 'Remnants of a Checkered Past: Female LTTE and Social Reintegration in Post-War Sri Lanka', *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62 (2018): 633-642.
[xlvii] The focus on people who became disabled as a result of the war was due to the focus of the research funding on the impact of conflict. The project was funded through the 'conflict' strand of PaCCS. Our sample included only adults with physical disabilities, in accordance with institutional ethical requirements.
[xlviii] Interview with Umagiliya, 2017.
[xlix] All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants. I have also not included information about the city in which they participated in the workshops, or described physical appearances in detail, in order to preserve anonymity.
[l] Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi De Alwis 'Bodies, Shrines and Roads: Violence, (Im)mobility and Displacement in Sri Lanka', *Gender, Place and Culture,* Vol 11, no. 4 (2004): 541-542.
[li] 'Staging War', 83 and 'From Temple to Battlefield', 122.
[lii] *Dance and the Nation,* 15.
[liii] I also discuss this discomfort with the sites of performance in Hetty Blades, 'Dance, Disability and Performance in North and East Sri Lanka': 336-7.
[liv] 'Sociocultural Construction of Disability in Sri Lanka'.
[lv] Jaana Parviainen 'Choreographing Resistances: Spatial-kinaesthetic Intelligence and Bodily Knowledge as Political Tools in Activist Work', *Mobilities,* Vol. 5, no. 3 (2010): 311-329.
[lvi] *Dance and the Nation,* 206.
[lvii] Ibid.
[lviii] Ibid.
[lix] Ibid, 207.
[lx] Judith Butler 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal,* Vol.40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.
[lxi] Ibid, 519.
[lxii] Ibid, 521.
[lxiii] Ibid, 527.
[lxiv] For a detailed account of the experience of female former cadres in Sri Lanka see 'Remnants of a Checkered Past'.

[lxv] 'Bodies, Shrines and Roads, 8.
[lxvi] 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender', 105.
[lxvii] Bandranaike is the Chair of the Sunera Foundation.
[lxviii] In 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender', 111.
[lxix] 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender'
[lxx] 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', 91.
[lxxi] Ibid.
[lxxii] 'Playing Disability, Performing Gender',111.
[lxxiii] 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', 91.
[lxxiv] Ibid.
[lxxv] Participant interview, 2017.
[lxxvi] 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', 91.